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Title: Spatial (mis)match and its travel consequences

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Abstract

Studies on the interaction between the built environment and travel behaviour might come across as deterministic: travel behaviour tends to be explained by spatial characteristics without considering the underlying behavioural mechanisms. Higher densities, more diversity and better local accessibility are often believed to result in less car use, more public transport and more cycling and walking. However, not all people that reside in high-density, diverse and accessible neighbourhoods travel by definition by public transport or walk and bike instead of using their cars. This is (partly) due to differences in perceptions. It might be possible that one person perceives the residence as unsafe preventing him or her to walk, whereas another person feels it is relatively safe to walk around. Recent studies are aware of such subjective influences, but tend to neglect the question whether these subjective influences correspond to reality. Therefore, this paper analyzes spatial (mis)match or, in other words, how people perceive their current residence and how this corresponds with the objectively measured spatial characteristics of that residence. This paper aims at describing the size and composition of spatial (mis)match in the first place (how many respondents have (mis)matched spatial perceptions? which socio-economic and lifestyle groups tend to perceive their residence in a correct way?). Secondly, we point out the travel consequences of (mis)matched spatial perceptions. Therefore, we used data from an Internet survey on lifestyles and leisure mobility in Flanders (Belgium) which also questioned the respondents' perceptions of their current residence. By adding information from other land use databases, spatial perceptions can be balanced against the characteristics of the respondents' current residence. We found that people overrate the urbanized character of their residence. Only 40% of all respondents perceive his/her residence in a correct way. Among urbanites, (mis)matched spatial perceptions do not influence modal choice. Within such an urban neighbourhood, modal choices remain mainly influenced by the urban characteristics and not by personal perceptions as such. However, the influence of spatial (mis)match becomes more important among ruralites and, especially, suburbanites. The travel consequences of (mis)matched spatial perceptions thus clearly depend on the residential neighbourhood type.